## Purpose

This activity focuses on questioning the traditional narrative of how cities and states were organized. By examining the different ways that people organized societies, we get at the heart of what we’re asking you to do in this course: question or challenge the narrative and explore historical events and processes that lie outside those that fit into neat boxes or definitions. There are societies that exist today that do not follow the standard model of organization we typically see around the world. This illustrates that although the world has become more alike in many ways, there are still differences.

## Process

In Unit 3, you encounter some of the biggest transformations in human history—the birth and growth of the city (urbanization), the first states and empires, and long-distance trade. We usually think of cities and states as being hierarchically structured with rulers, armies, and large buildings, such as temples. But there are a number of places where complex societies emerged that were different from this. One of these exceptions to the rule is Jenne-Jeno, which was a complex society (perhaps a state) of many people living together (in what we might call a city), but without the normal things we expect to see in either.

### Part 1:

Begin by imagining a scenario where you wake up, along with all the expected people around you (those in your home, extended families, and your whole community), but when you go out to the nearest city, there are no government buildings, no churches, mosques, or temples, or any other big monuments. There’s no written language, no borders, no government. In fact, there are only people and their houses and workplaces. How would you run things? What would you do? How would you begin to organize your community?

Your teacher will break the class into groups of 3 or 4 to come up with a strategy for organizing your community. Write your group’s organizational model on a piece of paper. You’ll have about 10 minutes to formulate your answers and organize your society.

### Part 2:

Now, your teacher will present the story of Jenne-Jeno, a collection of urban areas that existed from c. 250 BCE to 900 CE, located along the Niger River valley in present-day Mali (south of the Sahara Desert):

* Archaeologists found 69 tells (artificial mounds)
* Population estimated between 15,000 and 27,000 for the main habitation site (c. 900 CE) with approximately 42,000 for the entire urban area
* Sites were found for the production of ceramics, iron smelting, grain (sorghum, rice, and millet) as was evidence of animal husbandry and fishing, and ritual sites
* Researchers did not find evidence of temples, city walls, or palaces. No signs of a bureaucracy or monarch (ruler such as a king or chief), and no writing

### Part 3:

Next, you’ll have a whole class discussion about the traditional definition of a city as outlined by archaeologist V. Gordon Childe:

* Specialization of labor and social hierarchy including a ruling class
* Single, centralized authority
* Payment of taxes either to a religious leader or ruler such as a king
* Monumental architecture such as temples or palaces

What elements of Jenne-Jeno fit with Childe’s more traditional explanation? Share your thoughts with the class.

### Part 4:

Now, your teacher will present two archaeologists’ explanation for how they’ve interpreted the evidence found at Jenne-Jeno. After learning about these interpretations, work with your group members to think about the similarities and differences between how your group envisioned your imagined community and how these archaeologists envisioned the structure of Jenne-Jeno. Share the similarities and differences your group finds with the class.

### Part 5:

Finally, your teacher will write the words support, extend, and challenge on the board and ask you to jot down some ideas in response to the following question:

*How does the information you learned about Jenne-Jeno support, extend, and challenge what you’ve been presented about cities, complex societies, and the communities frame in this unit?*

Share your ideas with the class by going up to the board to write your thoughts under the appropriate category. Your teacher will then lead a brief discussion to wrap up this activity.